



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie by Luis Bunuel
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Film Quarterly, Vol. 26, No. 2. (Winter, 1972-1973), pp. 14-17.

Stable URL:

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Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

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spirit with which Londoners face them, seem to have changed, nor the joy with which small boys receive marching troops, be they German steel helmets or whatever. We supply our contemporary 1972 ideology to go with the historical, 1936 material, but essentially the propaganda effect is the same—the fact remains that images of actuality are used by the mind for the construction of its own illusions.

It is the comprehension of this process, and the ability to steer it, which makes a master propagandist out of a film editor. Leni Riefenstahl knew and understood the process, and used it for a clear political purpose. Mussolini's men tried, but didn't master it, so they added heavy-handed narrations which often contradict the

images as a banal way of saying with film that which they wanted to say. Thus, the narrator, despite the empty streets of Florence in view, talks of the multitudes that received Hitler, and despite the haggard and sullen face of Afanegus Atuofi, who in the absence of the escaped Hailie Selassie surrendered to Italy's Viceroy Graziani in October of 1936, the accompanying text speaks of the proud "joining of Abyssinia to the Italian Empire." It is fortunate for us that these newsreels were badly made—the juxtaposition of that which is shown and that which is maintained in the text gives us a new, third dimension of truth. What we must avoid doing, at all costs (and this is the lesson of these materials) is to think of our new comprehension as definitive.

Reviews

THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE

Director: Luis Buñuel. Script: Buñuel and Jean-Claude Carrière. Photography: Edmond Richard.

On the night of December 4, 1930, members of the League of Patriots and the Anti-Jewish League interrupted the projection of a new movie by hurling rocks and inkwells at the screen of Studio 28, the leading avant-garde movie theater of Paris. After this patriotic display they rushed into the lobby to tear up the paintings of the young artists who had chosen to exhibit there. Among them were some of the leading painters of the day, men like Joan Miró, Max Ernst, Man Ray, Salvador Dalí. Curiously enough, the authorities were not so much intent on punishing the demonstrators as they were on imposing restrictions on the film itself. First, they merely demanded the removal of its explicitly sacrilegious passages, but when the outcry in the daily papers became too loud, they decided to ban the movie altogether. Indeed, the newspapers were right: the movie's anticlericalism was perhaps its least offensive feature. The movie was an all-out attack on bourgeois society, showing its very foundations being shaken sim-

ply by the violent love of a man and a woman. In the movie we see them roll around in the mud, their frenetic screams of delight disrupting the proceedings of a state ceremony conducted by high officials nearby. Separated from his love, the man lets loose his fury on a blind man and a dog by kicking them aside. The passion of the women is so strong that the toilet paper ignites when she sits on the john. Yes, such a movie was unfit for public consumption. The ban that the fascist disrupters succeeded in imposing on the film was not lifted until the end of the Nazi occupation of France. Even now, Luis Buñuel's *L'Age d'Or* (*The Golden Age*) is unknown in America to all but avid archivists of the cinema.

A lot of pictures have flickered on the screen since that memorable night in Studio 28. Yet over the years Buñuel's surrealistic vision and his concern with human nature in what is definitely not the best of all possible worlds have remained constant. To that his latest movie, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, bears witness.

Buñuel has said that he bases his movies on a single image or idea that grabs hold of him. *Viridiana* developed from his vision of an old

man holding in his arms a young girl unable to resist him because she is under the influence of drugs. *Simon of the Desert* grew out of the image of a saint withdrawing from the world by living on top of a column—the story of Simon the Anchorite who did just that somewhere in Asia Minor in the fourth century. *The Exterminating Angel* was based upon the idea that a group of fashionable people gathered together are unable to leave the premises. And the central problem of *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* is that a group of people who are trying to get together for dinner are prevented from doing so by an extraordinary series of unforeseen circumstances. Buñuel himself has remarked upon the close relationship between these last two films. He sees them both as surrealist creations—that is, movies based on a surrealist premise as distinguished from the realistic vein of *Tristana* and the theological nature of *The Milky Way*.

The movie begins with two couples driving up to an elegant house in the Paris suburbs for the intended dinner. They are most cordially welcomed by the hostess, but they soon find out that their dinner invitation was for the following day. They graciously invite their hostess to accompany them to dinner and so the five of them drive to a nearby restaurant. They are allowed to enter after some mysterious hesitation on the part of the woman who opens the locked door. Although they find it somewhat unusual to be the only customers, they proceed to order from the elegant menu. Muffled sobs bring the women to their feet and into an adjacent room to investigate. The body of the owner is laid out on the funeral bier surrounded by the mourning family. The customers are informed that he passed away that very afternoon so there simply has not been enough time to remove his body. The women are intent on leaving, but now the previously hesitant waiter insists that the guests stay, assuring them of an excellent dinner. The waiter's warm assurances only serve to accentuate the black humor of the situation.

Gradually the plot is unfolded, but it really does not develop very far. That the three friends in question are the ambassador of a Latin Amer-



ican republic and his two partners in an international heroin ring is of little consequence: no gut-searing chase scenes here à la *French Connection*, no glimpse into the machinations of the Corsican mafia. Instead, the film becomes a series of loosely joined episodes, vaguely related to the initial impulse of the film. Buñuel's latest idea does not lend itself to a dense elaboration as was possible with his idea of people confined by an unknown force in *The Exterminating Angel*. In fact, his premise is its polar opposite—the problem of getting together instead of trying to separate. The loose structure of the film is inherent in that initial idea.

When an academic speaks of lack of structure, you can be sure that he is trying to pan a work. Years of apprenticeship at brightly lit stalls brings out a compulsive need to put a framework around everything. But Buñuel was forged on the anvil of anarchist Spain, only to be thrown into the cauldron of Parisian surrealism. "Today I feel happy because I achieved a certain physical victory over myself. But I would be just as happy if I had not shot the film. I am a little bit of a nihilist, I don't care much about what I do." Buñuel's anarchic spirit emerges in full force in this movie. It does so in spite of the fact (or is it because?) he has worked on it on and off for the last two and a half years, ever since he finished *Tristana*. Indeed, the film's lack of rigorous structure carries out the disparate spirit of the working premise.

Buñuel's very first film tried to create such ap-

parent incoherence. *Un Chien Andalou* was an attempt to express in a film the spontaneous illogic which the Surrealists had tried to embody on canvas and in verse. Yet they also knew that their fervent search for chaos would reveal a new, hitherto virtually unexplored realm of experience, the terrains of the unconscious. Echoing Freud, they drew deeply from their dream life in order to confront man with the frightening disorder that lurked in the shadows of his mind. Thus Buñuel, working with Dali, joined a number of dream images, systematically removing anything that they thought might have a symbolic meaning, and in this way arrived at *Un Chien Andalou*.

If all of this seems to be talking around Buñuel's latest film it is because the movie refuses to be put inside any kind of framework. After the initial premise is all too clearly stated Buñuel plunges into the dreamworld of his characters. Since they are unable to fulfill the most ordinary of social obligations their human drama is revealed through an ingenious display of their internal explosions. The Ambassador of Miranda, for example, dreams of being held up by bandits at dinner and escaping their machine gun fire by ducking underneath the table. He is noticed because, out of sheer gluttony, he reaches up with his hand to grab a piece of meat lying on a plate. As he is about to be shot, he wakes up alarmed—and goes out to the kitchen for a midnight snack to soothe his nerves. Towards the end when the three men are under arrest, the investigator has a nightmarish dream about a sergeant whose brutal methods of torture are celebrated by a special holiday given to all policemen so they may avoid his ghost which comes back to haunt the prison. The investigator is awakened from his catnap by no other than the vile sergeant who in reality is his obedient underling. In such flights of fantasy (which even include one dream-within-a-dream) Buñuel explores the inherent violence of his characters, which is subordinated in everyday life to the ludicrous social niceties of a bourgeois existence. But juxtaposed with the violence is helplessness when confronted by an impossible situation requiring those same niceties, as when the young couple feel forced to accept the bishop

who volunteers to be their gardener. Buñuel reveals their latent brutality through their violent dreams. His portrayal is a fantastic but nonetheless accurate and even sympathetic treatment of the bourgeoisie—men trapped by their attempts to conform to a reality which is ultimately external to them.

Buñuel's presentation of the bourgeoisie's dilemma is nothing less than kaleidoscopic. He mirrors the strange yet familiar behavior of the middle classes in a number of different and suggestive fragments. After all, the middle class lies close to his heart; as he said in connection with the movie, the bourgeoisie lies much more in his realm than does the proletariat. He is and has always been intrigued by the contradictions which this class, this mentality is unable to resolve. Thus, he recognizes a certain charm that they possess, but this charm they themselves would like to qualify as being of a discreet nature. Buñuel incorporates their very own standards into the title of his film, but in doing so he imparts to it an immediate ironic sense. They cannot both fulfill their social obligations and be faithful to their natural impulses. As the guests are due to arrive the young couple begin to make love. The guests turn up; the couple escape out the window to consummate their passion behind some bushes; the Ambassador fears a police trap, and the guests leave, again without their dinner.

Scenes of people eating abound in Buñuel's movies because he is always interested in depicting the most ordinary of daily actions, incorporating them in the most unusual tales. Bourgeois life is characterized by the exaggerated celebration of fundamental human activities—such as the ritualized group meal. The bourgeois dinner is exposed, as it were, in one of the dreams when the partners have just seated themselves, finally, around the table. To their great surprise and embarrassment the curtains are raised and they find themselves seated on a stage, watched by a full house. It is again their sense of privacy and decorum that makes them hurry off.

The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie, more than any other recent Buñuel work, is surrealistic from its premise down to its smallest details. Dreams, for example, play an important part in

the movie as a whole: they help above all to reveal suppressed violent forces which inhabit the unconscious. But since the Surrealists considered dreams to be a part of everyday life, they sought to abolish the dividing line between the conscious and unconscious realms. In a similar vein, Buñuel's dream sequences here grow out of real situations and it is only when they end up in peculiar conclusions followed by the dreamer waking with a start that we realize these events were the product of human fantasy.

It also happens that a totally incredible situation ends without such a clear explanation. The bishop who has become the young couple's gardener is called to administer a dying man's last rites. The man confesses that he had once poisoned a young boy's parents with arsenic. The clergyman realizes the victims in question were his own parents. With a certain professional integrity he administers the last rites, then slowly walks over to the side of the barn, picks up a gun and blows the dying man's brains out. Whether dream or reality, the event shakes us with its extreme violence, yet its incongruity evokes a certain laugh from deep within us.

The images that unfold often remain without explanation, and that is precisely how they were intended to strike us—immediately, deeply, without reference to a framework. A striking recurring image of the film, which becomes its final scene, is that of the six characters walking down a road. In talking about the meaning of this scene Buñuel explains the way he uses images:

I immediately thought of a road—which reappears in the film as a leitmotif. And I thought that one could show these bourgeois first normal, a second time bored, a third time tired and wounded. Then I felt that it was necessary to conserve the image as is, in its innocence, in order not to elicit a symbolic interpretation, so that it could not be said: this is the end of the bourgeoisie, this is society which does not know where it's going. But symbols will certainly be found in this film, as always. I have never expressly used symbols. Here, there is neither good, nor evil, only people who walk on a road.

That almost obsessive image reinforces the theme in a visual way. It is surrealistic because of its specific meaninglessness, and its general impact.

The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie is Buñuel's funniest film: its humor is totally surrealist in nature. The Ambassador of Miranda is being watched by a young revolutionary in front of his office. To get rid of her he shoots with a high-power rifle the walking toy dog she pretends to be selling. A puffy-cheeked peasant woman runs up to the bishop, as he is going to see a dying man, and confesses to him that she has always detested Jesus Christ. The military friends of the dope smugglers drop in on them at dinnertime when their maneuvers take them to the house. They light up joints but the smugglers embarrassedly admit they've never touched the stuff. When they admonish the colonel not to smoke he retorts, "The whole American army in Vietnam is doing it."

"That's why they end up bombing their own troops," cautions the smuggler.

"So much the better," gleams the colonel.

We are really taken aback to find a Buñuel movie which makes us laugh from beginning to end. But Buñuel has always created a jolting kind of humor. The bizarre sight of a man drawing a piano with donkey carcasses on top and two priests trailing behind in *Un Chien Andalou* may indeed symbolize the inhibitions society places on the love act, but it is also a terribly funny image. In *Los Olvidados* when Jaibo is about to kill a boy we see a tall skeleton of a building in the background. Only the producer's objections prevented Buñuel from placing a full orchestra on its steel beams. Black humor, the irrational, comedy in its most jarring form have always been a staple of the surrealist diet. In *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* Buñuel has given us a work in which his surrealistic sense of humor emerges more fully than in any of his films since *L'Age d'Or*.

—STEPHEN KOVACS